

# Indian Traditions of Environmental Thoughts – A Special Reference to Bishnoi Movement

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**Abstract:** India is the home of Vedic culture. Long before environment became the prime focus of the global song at Stockholm and Rio, the Indian tradition had already provided a cultural, spiritual and ethical home for the environmental ethos. The Indian tradition of environmental thought expose a full understanding about the negative consequences of environmental deterioration. The relationship of nature and life was central idea to Vedic thought. Environmental concepts vary from age to age as it depends on the circumstances and behavioural pattern that are common at that specific moment. In the history of mankind the Bishnoi movement was an unparalleled event where the Bishnoi community, driven by religious sentiment, sacrificed their lives to safeguard trees. This paper explores a continuum of ways in which environmental consciousness had been expressed by Indian thinkers since ancient times with special reference to Bishnoi movement.

**Keywords:** Bishnoi movement, Environmental ethos, Environmental thoughts, Indian tradition, Vedic thought.

## 1. Introduction

A balanced approach of all human efforts towards environment has usually been encouraged by Indian traditions, which are rooted in the holistic Vedic philosophy. The problem of environmental degradation was not prominent during the Rig Vedic period. The thinkers of the time of the Rig Veda did not consider of environment in the modern sense as we understand. They thought about nature. The scope and spread of their nature consciousness was very wide. The ancient thinkers of the Vedic age discovered the source of power and beauty in nature. They ascribed divinity to natural sources so that no element of nature would be distorted by human intervention. For millennia, this made sure that economic growth would not negatively impact the environment. But, man himself brought the technological revolution to make his life comfortable that can be considered as the only factor of all the destructions happening on Earth [1]. Unbridled industrial and commercial exploitation of the resources of the Earth is the root cause of destruction. It is well established that the world population has doubled during the last fifty years [2]. The negative impact of population explosion can hardly be overlooked.

Scientific and Technological progress has given mankind an unprecedented scope to overpower nature which can radically change the world. Installation of developmental programmes,

urban growth and industrial activities has increased the strain on ecological conditions and natural resources [3]-[5]. Environmental deterioration can be attributed to industrialization and urbanization, the depletion of traditional sources of energy and raw materials, exponential growth of human population, the disruption of natural ecological balances, the extinctions of various animal and plant species. All these may put man and biosphere to the brink of degeneration [6].

The current paradigm for development, which is used in the majority of the world, places people at the centre and designs systems accordingly. All resources are believed to be intended only for the boundless consumption of humans, who are held exclusively accountable for happiness.

The vulnerability of environment caused by human being has initiated the global ecological movement as a value-driven social movement. Basically *environmentalism* provides an ethic which will necessarily guide environmental movements for the benefit of man and his society [7]. This ethic is completely compatible with the goal of sustainability. The concept of environmentalism has its roots in the late 19<sup>th</sup> century.

From studies it is evident that a scientific temperament was existent in our ancestors. They had sound and accurate knowledge not only in the fields of metaphysics and dharma but also applied sciences. It is very much astonishing that our ancestors were directed by scientific intuitive. The issue of conservation of natural environment has been covered in great detail in Sanskrit and other ancient Indian regional languages. Vedic literature and later Sanskrit literatures have large number of references of trees which are associated with our social rituals and special occasions. This aspect of our traditional knowledge is of great importance as it can be utilized to formulate conservation strategy for these trees. The religious and social sentiments attached with the trees can be utilized for involving mass population for conservation of arboreal diversity [8]. The Ramayana and Mahabharata, the two greatest epics in human history, are abundant in information regarding conservation of nature in addition to their excellent lessons on ethical, social, administrative, familial, strategic, and spiritual aspects.

Ancient sources of extensive knowledge demonstrate a complete understanding of the negative consequences of

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environmental degradation, whether brought on by natural phenomena or human activities. The Vedic culture of India views human development as an integral component of the greater cosmos. The rich biodiversity that has flourished in the subcontinent since prehistoric times is also extensively documented in our scriptures. The Sthapatya Veda, an ancient science, offers a wealth of information on the principles of life-supporting architecture and design. Ayurveda's relevance in the present age lies in its scientific and holistic approach to the cure and treatment of a disease. The existence of the ozone layer, which shields the planet from the sun's harmful radiation, is explicitly mentioned in the Rig Veda. It also praises the radiation that enters the atmosphere and is responsible for the health of the environment.

The environmental movement in India is said to be sprouted with the Chipko Movement which made Indian people conscious of the vulnerability of environment caused by human agency. In this context the Bishnoi Movement that happened prior to Chipko Movement is noteworthy. The Bishnoi community driven by religious sentiment sacrificed their lives to safeguard trees in 1730.

This paper explores a continuum of ways in which environmental consciousness has been expressed by Indian thinkers since ancient times through their various works. Among the scriptures of ancient India, environmental thoughts are included in this paper from the Hindu Philosophy viz. Vedas (Rig Veda, Sam Veda, Yajur Veda) of approximately 1500 BC, the Atharvaveda of 1000 BC, the Mahabharata of 900 BC, the Upanishads of 800 - 700 BC, the Ramayana of 750 - 700 BC. Environmental thoughts also included from Buddhist philosophy (486 BC) and Jainism (468 BC) with a special reference to Bishnoism (1508 AD) and Bishnoi Movement (1730 AD).

## 2. Different Aspects of Environmental Thought

### A. *Spiritual Aspect*

India, the country with the most naturalistic religion, honours nature with a great spiritual philosophy and many rites and rituals. The spiritual leaders at all levels often played a significant role for success of the global solidarity movement towards ethical, moral and spiritual commitment to environmental protection. The bible contains about a hundred verses that discuss environmental conservation and referring the Bible is a smart step for the solution to the ecological catastrophe [9]. There is not much regarding the relationship between humans and nature in the Analects of Confucius, but there are some humanist concepts associated with ecology and natural preservation that are part of Confucianism [10]. Almost all Indian faiths are based on the ethical precept of reverence for nature and all of its creations. In reality, Indian mythology contains a number of religious beliefs about environment. A religion with strong roots in nature is Hinduism. There are numerous allusions to natural deities throughout the sacred texts (the Vedas, Upanishads, Bhagavad Gita, and Epics) that are associated with natural elements like rivers, trees, mountains, animals, and the soil. Hinduism advocates

environmental conservation and ecological balance [11]. Islam takes a stewardship stance when it comes to the environment. Numerous Qur'anic verses advocate for environmental conservation [12]. One of the main lessons taught by the Buddha is the concept of karma, which instills virtues such as conservation and future responsibility [13]. The fundamental tenet of Jainism is ahimsa, or non-violence in all facets of existence. The philosophical, physical, and mental tenets of Jainism centre on leading a tranquil and orderly existence. Jains practice vegetarianism, self-control and avoiding waste. They are also kind to animals. The founding scripture, the Guru Granth Sahib, wrote the sacred text, which contains numerous environmental precepts. The puranic literature also covers messages related to the conservation of environment [11]. Indian culture has long practiced tree worship and this idea has contributed to the preservation of biodiversity at large.

In Rig Veda, Surya is the soul of all the movable and immovable (Rig Veda, 1/115/1). The divine world and space are full of His rays. Regarding the importance of the sun, it is said - the sun has risen in the form of the eyes of Mitra, Varuna and Agni with various radiant rays. Similarly, the movement of the sun, night and day (Rig Veda, 1/123/7, 8, & 1/164/2, 3, 11, 12), the northern movement and southern movement of the sun (Rig Veda, 6/32/5), calculation of the days of the year (Rig Veda, 1/115/6), full moon and new moon (Rig Veda, 2/32/8), moon light and solar radiation (Rig Veda, 1/84/15), solar eclipse (Rig Veda, 5/40/5, 6, 7, 8, 9), agriculture (Rig Veda, 4/57/3, 4, 5, 6, 7, 8), agricultural methods, water supply for animals, water storage system, conservation (Rig Veda, 10/101/3, 4, 5, 6, 7, 8, 10), animal husbandry and conservation (Rig Veda, 4/2/5 & 7/62/5) etc. are mentioned in various mantras in Rig Veda [14].

Scattered references to the importance of water in life, the role of water in ecosystems and environmental ideas or concepts on the water cycle are found in various mantras of the Sam Veda. In particular, the important aspect of the water cycle is mentioned very clearly in the Uttararchic Mantra of the Sam Veda (7/1/3/1041). Evaporation of water from ocean etc. by sunlight. Seawater contains various organic matter and inorganic salts, which are refined by evaporation. Later that vapor floats in the sky as clouds consisting of fine water particles [14].

The importance of the sun, the relationship of the sun with the immovable and the movable, the rotation of the earth are mentioned in the 46 numbered mantras of the thirteenth chapter of Shukla Yajurveda [14]. The various mantras of the various chapters of this Veda deal with seasons (Sukla Yajurveda, IV Kanda, IV Prapathak, Mantra 11), agriculture, ploughing, care and conservation of land (Sukla Yajurveda, Twelfth Chapter, Mantras 67, 68, 69), animal diversity (Sukla Yajurveda, Chapter 24, Mantras 1 - 10, 21). The concept of agriculture also mentioned in the Atharva Veda (Part - 3, Chapter - 4, Mantras 1 to 9 of Sukta 2).

The Ramayana has references to a number of Gurukuls and Ashrams that provide comprehensive education and are managed by Rishi scientists who value their students' physical, mental and spiritual development. There was abundant wildlife

in the vicinity of Ashrams. Every visitor was always asked by rishis about the health of the local plants and animals as well as their own. Tapovana is mentioned in Ramayana where Muni Rishis perform penance. Here the ashrams of the sages used to reside and there the ashram-dwelling disciples would learn from the Guru. This ashram was full of flowers and fruits and various plants and herbs. Although people collect their daily fuel, herbs from here, special attention was paid to the conservation and nurturing of these forests. New plantations and afforestation were also undertaken. Three different types of ecosystems are indicated by the Ramayana depending on the local geography, flora and fauna, diversity of waterfalls, and climatic conditions. These ecosystems are the tropical deciduous forest, the semi-forest system of the Alpine region (especially the Himalayan region), and the evergreen forest of Sri Lanka [14].

In the Anushasana Parva of the Mahabharata, Vishma informs Yudhishtira about the advantages of planting of trees which is considered to bring prosperity and honour to the ancestors. As a result, mankind must plant trees. It is claimed to recognize the tree in this instance as the planter's offspring. The result will be an intensification of the spiritual bond between the planter and the tree. This concept is considered one noteworthy aspect of ancient Indian environmental thought [14].

### *B. Philosophical Aspect*

India is a nation that has taught people to live in harmony with nature for centuries. Almost all of the great Indian philosophy starting with the Vedas emphasized the value of nature. The Indian philosophical tradition have reverence for all which exists in nature [15]. Indian philosophical thoughts on environment explains that nature can satisfy everybody's need if one maintains harmony with the given environment. The idea of nature and life is central to Vedic philosophy. Vedic writings depict nature worship in its purest, earliest form. The R̥g Veda, the eldest surviving script of Hinduism, claims that nature has the power to enhance human life, increase reproduction, and regulate climate [16]. The Yajur-Veda says clouds are formed by vegetation and the concept of natural balance has depicted in the Atharva-Veda [17]. The teachings of Buddhism aim to create a bridge that connects people with the environment. It appears that a Buddhist perspective is more appropriate for resolving the environmental issue. The relationship between humans and the natural world is the fundamental foundation for all environmental concerns. Nature is essential to the life and nutrition of all living things, including humans, animals, and plants [18]. Jainism believes an integrated relationship between human being and nature where the position of human being is within the universe and thus preservation of the natural environment is the major aspect of Jainism [15]. The Vedic hymns are replete with assertions, concepts and strange pictures that reveal universal scientific truths. In recent days, environmental science and ecology are disciplines of modern science under which study of environment and its constituents is done with microscopic details. Although they were founded in the 20th century as science, their roots may be traced all the

way back to Vedic and ancient Sanskrit literature.

The modern Sanskrit enriched with Vedic views bears the concept of Environment – the wise utilization of three elements of Nature i.e. water, air and plants or herbs. The scientific approach of environmental thought of today is already engineered in Vedic arena christened as Paryavarana. It substantiates scientific knowledge that the Vedic seers (prophecy) had about the basic elements of environment.

The body is composed of five components: soil, water, fire, air, and sky, according to Ram Charit Manas [19]. He cited the Bhagawadgita, in which Lord Krishna states that the elements of land, water, fire, air, and sky comprise his physical nature (and desire, intelligence and ego – Bhagawadgita: 7–4–5). Additionally, he brought forth a scripture from the Holy Koran that states, "He created all living things out of water."

The basic philosophy of Bishnoism comes from the set of 29 beliefs (Bish means twenty, Noi means nine) that make up the teachings of Guru Jambhoji. Ten of these 29 precepts deal with personal hygiene and preserving general health, nine deal with healthy social conduct, four deal with God's worship, and six deal with the preservation of biodiversity and the promotion of caring treatment of animals.

The concepts of environment usually vary from generation to generation, since they depend on the circumstances which prevalent at that particular time frame. According to Indian philosophy, everyone's needs can be met by nature as long as they coexist peacefully with their surroundings. Hindu philosophy, which acknowledges various stages of human existence, places significance on moving into a forest as one aged, a practice known as "Vanaprastha."

### *C. Cultural Aspect*

India has been nourishing the Vedic culture since ancient period. The great five sacrifices (Panchamahayajna) has been a vital part of this culture. It is very much significant that the people of India, in Vedic times, considered Nature and environment in holistic manner. They respected every element and entities of Environment and carefully preserved them. They forbade not harming any natural object on the earth and preached tranquility and serenity should remain in all objects of the Nature. Thus, Vedic prayer invokes divine intervention to bless and protect the environment.

The Vedas contain some of the oldest written references to nature as feminine, with the earth seen as a fierce goddess and the mother of all living things. The planet supplies food and cares for all beings who depend on it, much as a mother provides for all of her offspring [16].

The Chāndogya Upaniṣad and Bṛihadāraṇyaka Upaniṣad explain how all created beings in the universe are interdependent. According to the Śvetāśvatara Upaniṣad the luminous cosmic self permeates everything, including fire, water, plants, and other elements where the nature and the cosmos as a whole symbolise the cosmos and its functions as the constituent elements of a single entity [16].

Man's relationship with nature and his environment has in recent times become a topic of critical consideration. Some of the human activities largely responsible for the depletion of

fauna and flora have been identified as the deforestation, defective land use policies, and population growth. Some direct causes of environmental problems are industrial growth, agricultural chemicals, energy generation, deforestation, over exploitation of natural resources and defective policies in respect of city planning, damming of rivers, land use etc. [20]. While this concern may appear to be a reflection of the obviously harmful effects of modern industrialization, the problems may well be deeper. Of all the biotic resources, forests are considered as one of the most vital resource for human survival. The most significant contribution of a forest is to provide humans and other living organisms with oxygen without which life is not possible. Green forests also use CO<sub>2</sub> during photosynthesis and thus reduce one of the greenhouse gases. Furthermore, green forests and other photosynthetic plants entrap solar energy for all kinds of biota.

The life support system is a dynamic entity that supports and sustains biosphere. In Vedic literature, the significance and dynamic relationship of the elements of the life support system has been highlighted. Vedas and Upanishads described it as 'Apra Vidya' and the other form of knowledge that provides eternal happiness as 'Pra Vidya'. In Vedic literature, all the elements of the life support system are held in high esteem [21]. All major world faiths have historically exhibited some moral concern for the environment.

Lynn White Jr. [22] publicized the issue of religious attitudes toward nature through a paper titled "*The Historic Roots of our Ecological Crisis*". This paper criticized the Western societies for using science and technology to dominate and degrade their environment. He also accused Christianity, in specific, of enforcing a human-centered worldview. However, White provided an unduly simplified image of Christianity and its impact on Western culture and attitudes towards nature. White was favorable in opening up religious perspectives on the environment, science, and technology.

Southwick [23] stated, "..... It is doubtful if the ecological ills of the world can be blamed on any single religion or philosophic foundation. Nonetheless, the persistence and growth of the exploitation of land as property, existing solely for the use of man, was certainly fostered by the Judaic-Christian concept of land ownership".

In Sankhya, the oldest philosophical systems of Hinduism, Prakriti (nature) consists of three dispositions known as qualities (gunas): activity (rajas), inactivity (tamas) and steadiness (sattva). Sankhya presents a fundamental theoretical analysis of human nature. Atharva-Veda goes on to pray that the forests and plants on earth should have pleasing effect on people and Taitariya Brahamana says: Trees, space and earth are also endowed with the merits of supreme divinity [17].

The Varah Puran provides additional evidence of the importance of plants and trees to human life by endorsing frequent planting as a path to paradise. There are descriptions of the significant plantation event known as Vriksha Mahotsava (Tree Festival) in both Matsyapurana and Padmapurana. A tree plantation in Matsyapurana is equivalent to the offspring of ten sons [24].

The relation between man and nature is nicely depicted in the

symbol of Lord Buddha and the Jaina Trithankaras who are also pictured along with trees substantiating the concept of traditional genetic character of India.

Among Christians one can find very different attitudes towards environment. Positive route to environmental ethics in Christian theology is praising the inherent value and beauty of Creation, which definitely doesn't lack in the Bible (Gen 1:31, Ps 104, Rom 1:20, etc.). Most of these positive reasons for environmental concern are, of course, present also in Judaism and can be found in Islam too.

Pope John Paul II [25] significantly aided Christianity's resurgence of stewardship principles. He wrote "The Ecological Crisis: A Common Responsibility" which may be treated as the World Day of Peace message. He emphasized that environmental glitches are recognized as a moral crisis for all humankind.

The intensity and range of ecology movements in independent India have never been static; rather it have widening spectrum that continuously work because the predatory exploitation of natural resources to feed the process of development has increased voluminously. The process of economic development has been characterized by the massive expansion of energy use and resource-intensive industrial activity. The resources are exhausted either by direct transfer to meet the basic needs or by destruction of the essential ecological process.

### 3. Bishnoi Movement and Environmental Concern

The Bishnoi Movement of India was perhaps the first ecological movement in the context of not only India, but also world at large. It has already been mentioned that in the history of mankind the Bishnoi movement is an unparalleled event. The Bishnoi Movement did not come into existence as a result of pollution but for love of nature. At that time environmental degradation occurred slowly through the exploitation of nature. The Bishnois are said to have been the progenitors of this movement around 1730. They believe that cutting a tree or killing an animal is cruelty and therefore they imposed a ban on the cutting of any green tree and killing of any animal. They followed 29 principles as their religious belief [26]. Guru Maharaja Jambaji founded this religion. He witnessed a severe drought in his time that brought wanton destruction of forest in his locality [27], [28]. He felt that if trees are protected, animal life would be sustained and his community would be benefitted. So he gave twenty nine principles to save the nature as well as protect his community.

The Bishnois are a small community in Rajasthan, India, who practiced environmental conservation according to their faith. In 1730, Maharaja Abhay Singh of Jodhpur when started to build a new palace needed wood to fuel his limestone oven [26]. He then sent his men in search of wood and they chose to bring down trees from a Bishnoi locality. As the king's men began to fell trees, Amrita Devi, a Bishnoi woman, was horrified to see their precious trees falling before her eyes, and she appealed to the men to stop. But when soldiers did not pay any attention to her appeal Amrita Devi and others hugged the trees to protect them with their bodies. They flung their arms around the khejri

tree and refused to leave the place. Mercilessly, Amrita Devi was knocked down along with the tree. Her three daughters Asu, Ratni and Bhagu bai also gave up their lives to save khejri (a thorny evergreen) trees. Unhesitatingly, a large number of villagers, a total of 363, lost their lives trying to protect those Khejri (*Prosopis cineraria*) trees from being fallen. When the king heard about this tragic incident, he was so moved, that he proclaimed a strong royal decree preventing the cutting of trees.

In the year 1485, a saint named Guru Jambheshwar Ji founded Bishnoism in the Thar Desert of Rajasthan which is regarded as the most eco-friendly, simple, practical and caring sect of Hindu Dharma. Bishnoism was based on main 29 principles and best practices taken from all religions and faiths. Jambhoji was a remarkable visionary who predicted how man's actions will damage nature for economic growth. He saw the need for environmental protection and weaved his principles into religious commandments so that people can adopt those principles easily. Guru Jambheshwar resorted to religion in order to convey his message of loving kindness, respect for other faiths, and harmony with nature. He taught to protect Plants and Animals as they are important in order to peacefully coexist with nature. The teachings of Guru Ji were very clear, rational, useful, and efficient. The teachings of Bishnoism emphasize internal and exterior purity as well as love, peace, kindness, simplicity, honesty, compassion, forgiveness, and hard labour. Bishnois have fiercely protected the trees and wildlife in their surroundings to uphold the teachings of their Guru Jambheshwar Ji. For generations, they coexisted in perfect peace with trees and wild animals in the Thar Desert.

#### 4. Conclusion

Ancient Indian legacy had already given the environmental ethos a roomy spiritual home before ecology became the chorus of the world hymn at Stockholm and Rio de Janeiro. It is amazing how many allusions to environmental preservation, ecological balance, weather cycles, rainfall phenomena, hydrologic cycle, and other related topics can be found in ancient texts, which clearly demonstrates the high degree of understanding of the seers and people of that time.

Starting from the Indus Valley civilization to the present age the role of trees in cultural and social life has been of immense importance in India. The scriptures, Vedic, Puranic, Buddhist and Jains, are full of references of the significance of trees. Indian mythology, in fact, contains several religious beliefs concerning trees. This signifies reveres to the benefits provided by the trees to human beings and helped in conservation of many important species.

Indian philosophy places a strong emphasis on the friendly relationships that exist between all the components of our environment. Various rituals have been institutionalized to emphasize the significance of certain elements of our surroundings. These customs made sure that Indian tradition maintained peace and showed extreme caution towards the inanimate world as well [24].

In ancient Indian culture and tradition, many references to human responsibility towards nature and environment have been established. The daily life of common people in ancient

India was governed by some minimal ethical behavior towards the environment and nature. Ecological Harmony or the teaching of living in co-operation and harmony with nature or the need for friendly coexistence is clearly found in Vedic, Jain and Buddhist cultures and traditions. Not that some natural calamity, any urgent compulsion of existence, induced them to be attentive and docile to nature. Rather, the sages, the greatest thinkers of ancient India, combined reality and spirituality to develop an underlying brilliant sense of moral consciousness and responsibility towards nature and the environment [14].

Unlike all other movements the Bishnoi Movement sprouted from the seed of ideology only. There was no organization, no leadership even no specific agenda. Driven by the spirit of idealism and sense of liability for the environment [29], the Bishnoi Movement came into existence within few hours only with the death of 363 persons. Thus, it is obvious that the Bishnoi community, out of their devotion to environment, started the movement which contributed much to the greenery in arid Rajasthan [28].

Scientific attitudes and consciousness about the protection of the environment have changed due to the recent advancement in Technology but it is clear that our ancestors had a much broader and more comprehensive vision to live in harmony with the environment. A considerable part of Indian thought was devoted to the question of consciousness regarding environment. Although a part of this tradition deals with philosophical issues as well as religion aspect that cover knowledge both physical and spiritual in its true sense.

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